What is claimed is:

~~CLAIMS~~

1. A protein having a molecular weight of about ~~24kD~~ and capable of specifically binding to a protein of hepatitis C virus, or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof.

2. A protein or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof according to claim 1 which is functionally unglycosylated.

3. A protein or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof according to claim 1 or 2 wherein the protein is a transmembrane protein.

4. A process for the preparation of a protein or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof according to any one of claims 1 to 3 comprising the step of culturing cells exhibiting binding to an HCV protein and purifying from a cell preparation a ~~protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3.~~

5. A process according to ~~claim 4 wherein~~ the cell preparation ~~is~~ a plasma cell membrane preparation.

6. A process according to claim 4 or 5 wherein the cells are selected and cloned to provide hyperexpression of the protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3.

7. A process according to any one of claims 4 to 6 wherein the cell preparation is subjected to an ammonium sulphate precipitation purification step employing ammonium sulphate at between 33 and 50%

8. A process according to any one of claims 4 to 7 wherein the purification involves at least one step of hydrophobic interaction chromatography.

9. A process according to any one of claims 4 to 8 wherein the process involves at least one step of acetone precipitation

10. A process according to any one of claims 4 to 8 wherein comprising the steps of:

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i) preparing a plasma cell membrane preparation of mammalian cells selected for hyperexpression of the 24kd protein of the invention,

ii) subjecting the preparation to ammonium sulphate precipitation at less than 33% saturation and retaining the supernatant,

iii) subjecting the supernatant to ammonium sulphate precipitation at between 33 and 50% saturation and retaining the precipitate, and

iv) resuspending the precipitate and subjecting it to hydrophobic interaction chromatography

11. A method for treating an infection of HCV comprising administering to a patient an amount of a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof effective to reduce the infectivity of the virus.

12. A pharmaceutical composition comprising a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof, optionally as a pharmaceutically acceptable salt, in combination with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

13. A process for preparing a pharmaceutical composition, in which a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment

thereof is brought into association with a pharmaceutically acceptable carrier.

14. A protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof for use as a pharmaceutical.

15. Use of a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof in the manufacture of a medicament for the treatment of an HCV infection.

16. An assay for HCV antibodies in a serum sample comprising the step of allowing competitive binding between antibodies in the sample and a known amount of an HCV protein for binding to a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof and measuring the amount of the known HCV protein bound

17. A diagnostic kit comprising the protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof.

18. A method for screening chemical compounds for ability to bind to the region of HCV responsible for binding to a host cell, comprising measuring the binding of a chemical compound to be screened to a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof.

19. A transgenic non-human mammal, carrying a transgene encoding a protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof.

20. A process for producing a transgenic animal comprising the step of introducing a DNA encoding a

protein according to any one of claims 1 to 3 or a functionally equivalent variant or fragment thereof into the embryo of a non-human mammal, preferably a mouse.

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